



W2

S e a n L e a n

Wei-LingGallery

1x2

New paintings by Sean Lean

15 January - 29 February 2020

Supported by





M2 by Sean Lean

"I've barely scratched the surface before, and the images are too much fun to play with."

When considering the vast variety of influences that can affect our relationship with our cultural identity, none more succinctly encapsulates the struggle and tension of such conflicting experiences as artist Sean Lean. As a continuation of *'Motherland'*, *'M2'* sees Lean dive deeper into the crux of his obsession with his own contradictory cultural past, which draws from the vast toy box of Chinese bedtime stories and Sunday morning comic books to present us with this exploration into his cultural self.

"The treasure trove of imagery is still the same," says Lean, but how he plays with them are now very different. While *'M2'* explores many similar concepts and ideas as *'Motherland'*, Lean treats his subject matter with an undeniable sense of play and light heartedness this time, refusing to be bogged down by seriousness and guilt when discussing his cultural past. Coming from a "traditionally" Chinese upbringing, he recounts his childhood in terms of stories, and a lifetime spent on consuming a variety of disparate media, ranging from Romance of the Three Kingdoms to Lord of the Rings, TVB dramas to American sitcoms.

However, it isn't just the clash of cultural content that Lean finds most fascinating, but rather, it is the fissures encountered when trying to reconcile the specific customs and norms of his family's Chinese upbringing and his own comfort in Western culture. In an earlier interview for *'Motherland'*, Lean speaks specifically about a painting titled *'Dear God, keep my son away from harm, may he does well in school, protect him from...'*, a telling piece which was named after a prayer his mother would make for him. The painting, depicting a Chinese shrine on a background of Marvel superheroes articulates this idea most eloquently, perfectly illustrating the distance between the gods that his mother worships, and the gods that he does. Following this thread, *'M2'* sees him explore these same ideas with arguably a much subtler approach, with Lean choosing to emphasize these connections instead through playing with colour, technique and materiality.

A striking example of this, is his piece *Tiffany Blue Door (Heroine of the Yangs, Mu Guiying)* (2019). Here, Lean expertly combines aspects from his various cultural touchstones, interpreting the image of a Chinese deity in bright colours on a found door. The mythology surrounding the figure of Mu Guiying is an apt one, as a warrior and heroine, she is one of the guardians who would typically be placed on doors for protection. That is where the expected ends however, as Lean then utterly subverts our preconceived notions and associations.

Upon viewing the piece, it is immediately obvious that there is a metaphor to be drawn here between the nature of the door-turned-non-canvas and the deity turned image. For one, Lean has chosen to paint an interpretation of the guardian by depicting them as an opera singer. This blurs the line between the historical person and the mythical figure, a very familiar occurrence in many pieces of Chinese historical-fiction. This is further paralleled in the way in which he treats the door. In his transformation of it, Lean never allows it to become a surface simply for the appearance of the deity's image. Rather, he accentuates its identity repeatedly by presenting it with tiffany-blue trimmings. Even the presence of a handle here further emphasizes its identity, bringing to the forefront the conflict of its now transient nature, a half-fictional character on a half-fictional door.

It is through this juxtaposition that we identify the core of Lean's exploration into his relationship with culture, symbolizing the contradictions of his references in the liminal space where the door and deity reside. In the same way, much of the other works in 'M2' explores these same contradictions through a rigorous process of experimentation with colour and materials.

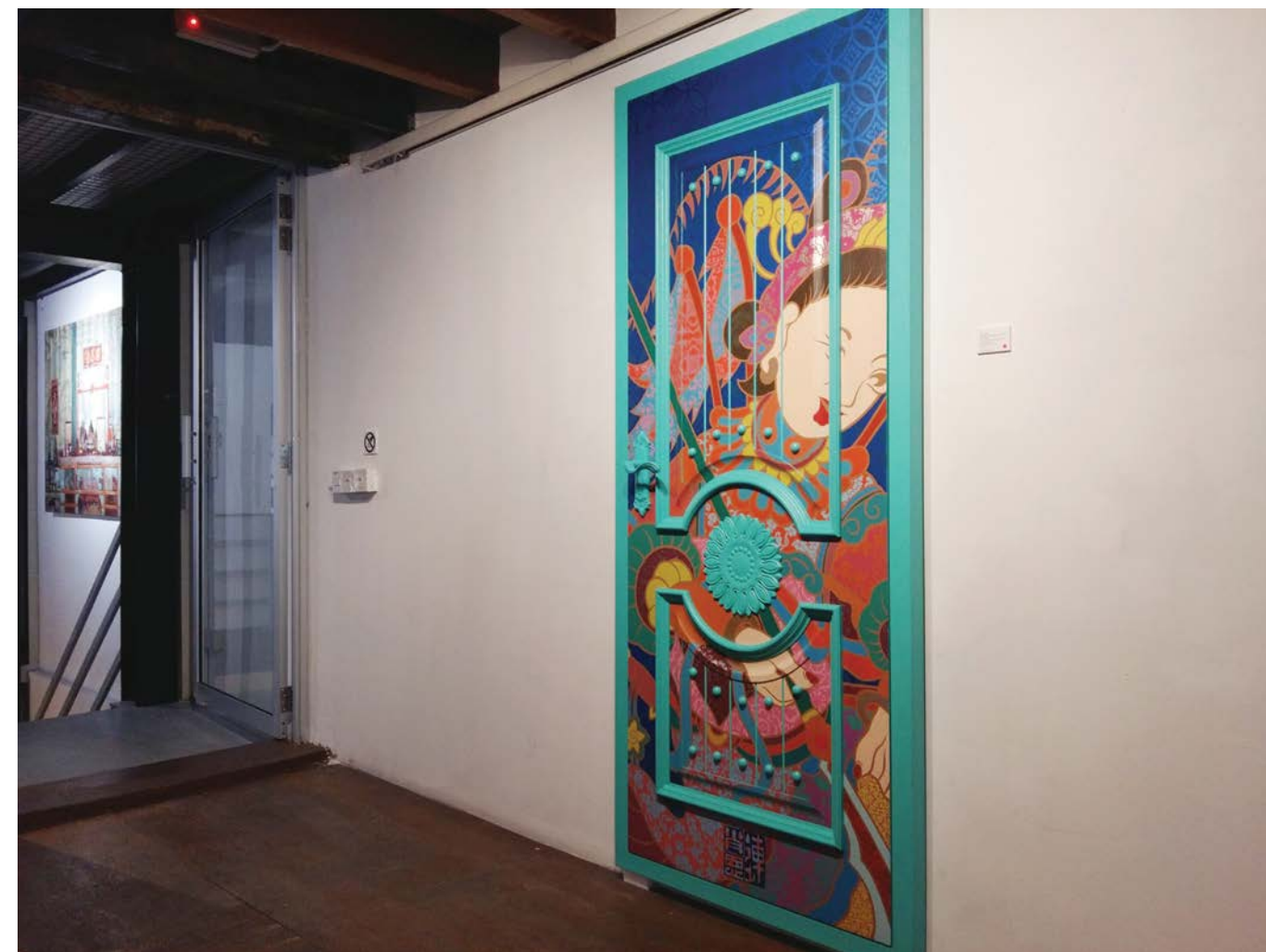
In the trio titled *Cranes Sunrise (Traditional)* (2019), *Crane Sunrise (Samples)* (2019), and *Crane Sunrise (Distressed Pastel)* (2019), we see Lean take the typically East Asian iconography of a pair of cranes and repeat it three times on steel, each with a distinct change in colour palettes. The first iteration sees the cranes dressed in red, blue and white, a traditional colour scheme for the subject matter. The third however, sees it stenciled in bright pastel pink; but most fascinating is the center piece, which depicts the cranes in a combination of the two palettes, forming a

third blend of colours. The symbolism is easy to follow here, and is a repeating theme in the other trios, drawing a clear line between that which is traditional and expected, to that which is deliberately other and different. The point where they meet in the center is where Lean seems to sit. Not in the old or in the other, but somewhere in the middle where the new resides.

When asked about the formal progress of his practice, Lean reveals that, unlike the enamel and canvas pieces in '*Motherland*', his new fascination lies instead with hard steel, stencils, and automotive car paint, relishing in removing the human touch from the very human subject matter. As Lean so eloquently describes it, the tension between the cold, industrial and forceful nature of steel actively undermines his ideas of culture, and the culturally ingrained images in his work. "*Culture is transient, and in a flux,*" he muses "*whereas metal is a mineral, an anchor*".

'M2' brings with it an undeniable sense of urgency, interrogating our understanding and expectation of culture, only to turn and undermine them at every turn. It is an introspective, rigorous look into Lean's own differing identities, and the many ways one can find reconciliation between these tensions. At the core of it, the work teases at our personal stances, and cultural positions towards his interpretation of Chinese cultural icons and relationship to western media. This ultimately affects how we view Lean's work: is it a playful experiment, a sacrilegious act or perhaps a body of work consisting simply of lines, shapes and colours?

Tan Aileen
January 2020

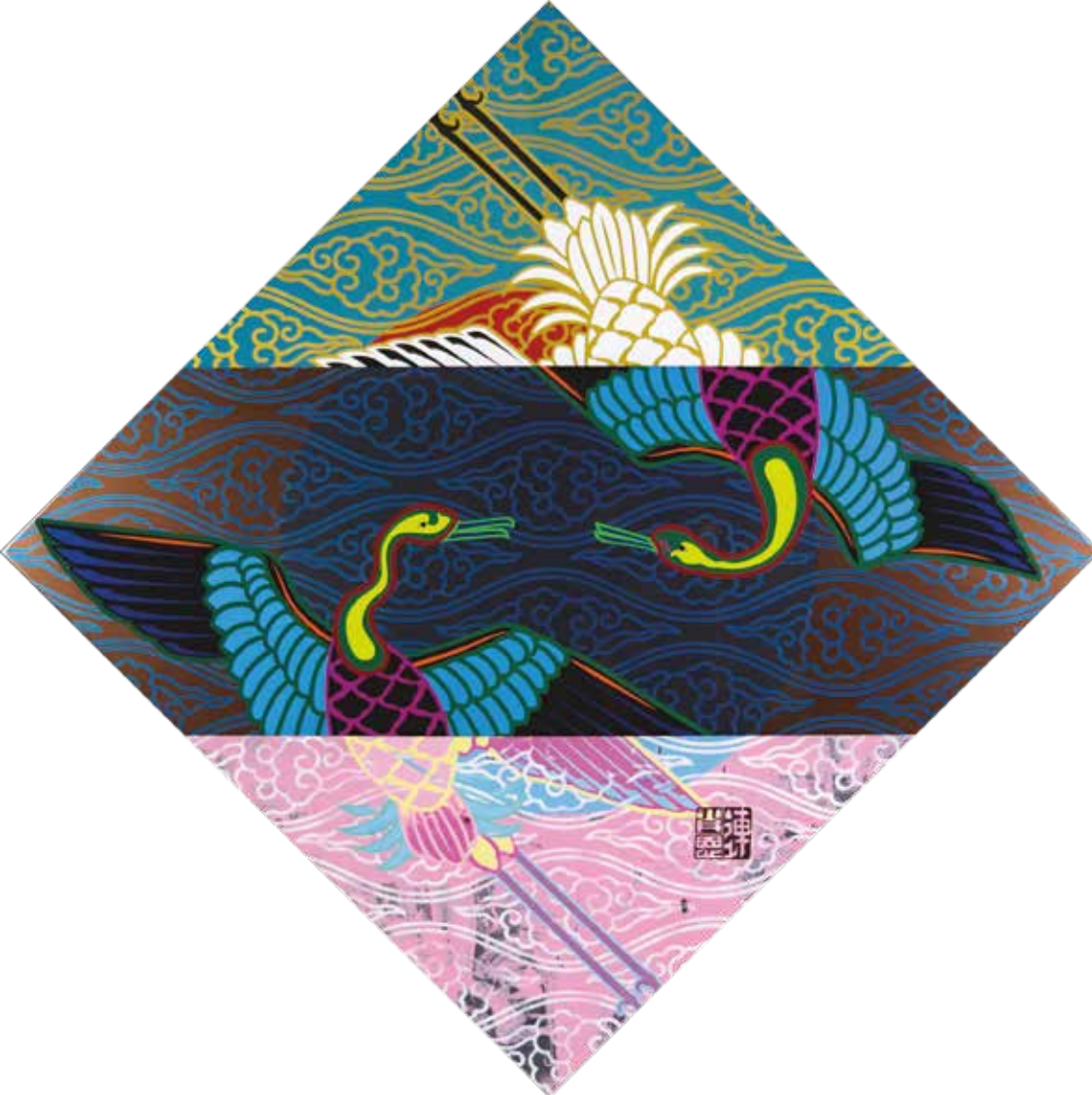




Cranes Sunrise (Traditional) (2019) | Automotive Paint on Steel; 158.5cm x 158.5cm



Crane Sunrise (Distressed Pastel) (2019) | Automotive Paint on Steel; 158.5cm x 158.5cm



Crane Sunrise (Samples) (2019) | Automotive Paint on Steel; 158.5cm x 158.5cm



Dragon (Traditional). Round (2019) | Automotive Paint on Steel; 135cm diameter



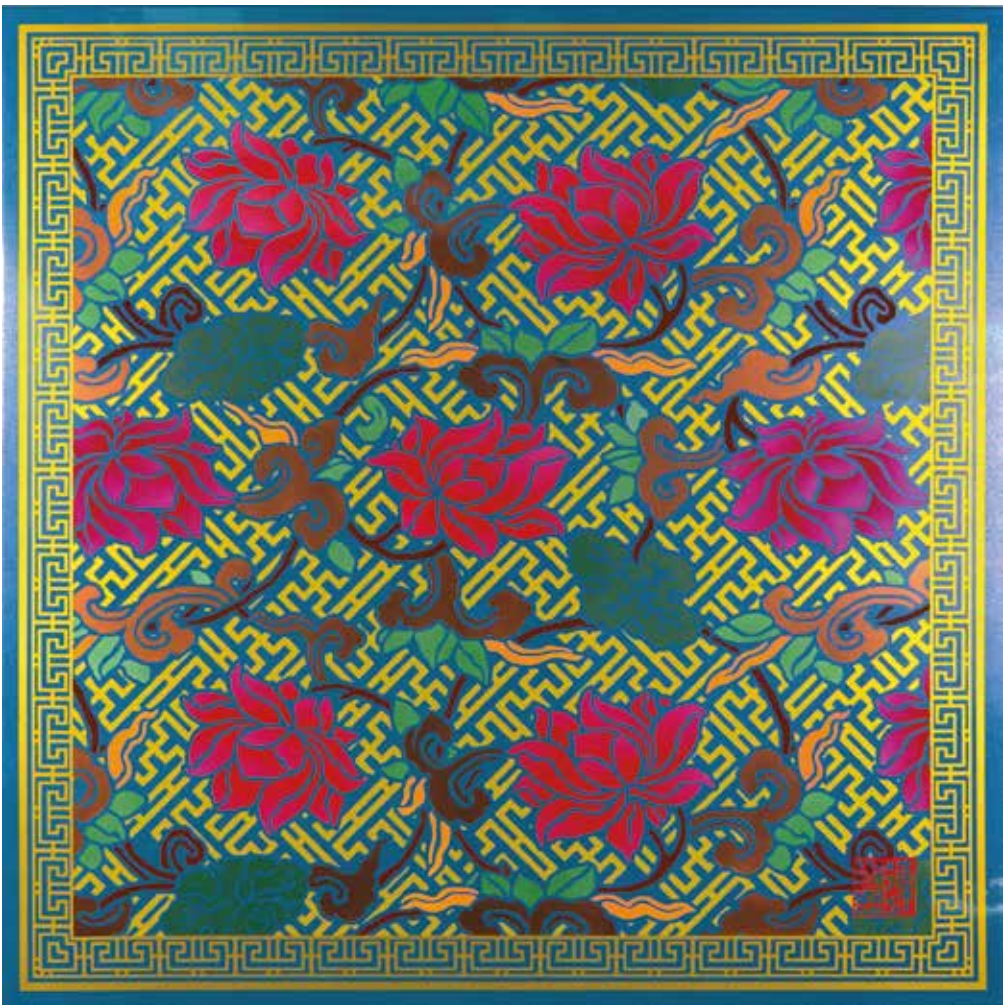
Dragon (Grayscale). Round (2019) | Automotive Paint on Steel; 135cm diameter



Dragon (Samples). Round (2019) | Automotive Paint on Steel; 135cm diameter



Lotus Flowers on swastikas (Dots) (2019) | Automotive Paint on Steel; 112cm x 112cm



Lotus Flowers on swastikas (Traditional) (2019) | Automotive Paint on Steel; 112cm x 112cm



Lotus Flowers on swastikas (Samples) (2019) | Automotive Paint on Steel; 112cm x 112cm



Blue and White Porcelain, Girl with Flute (2019) | Automotive Paint on Steel; 160cm x 80cm



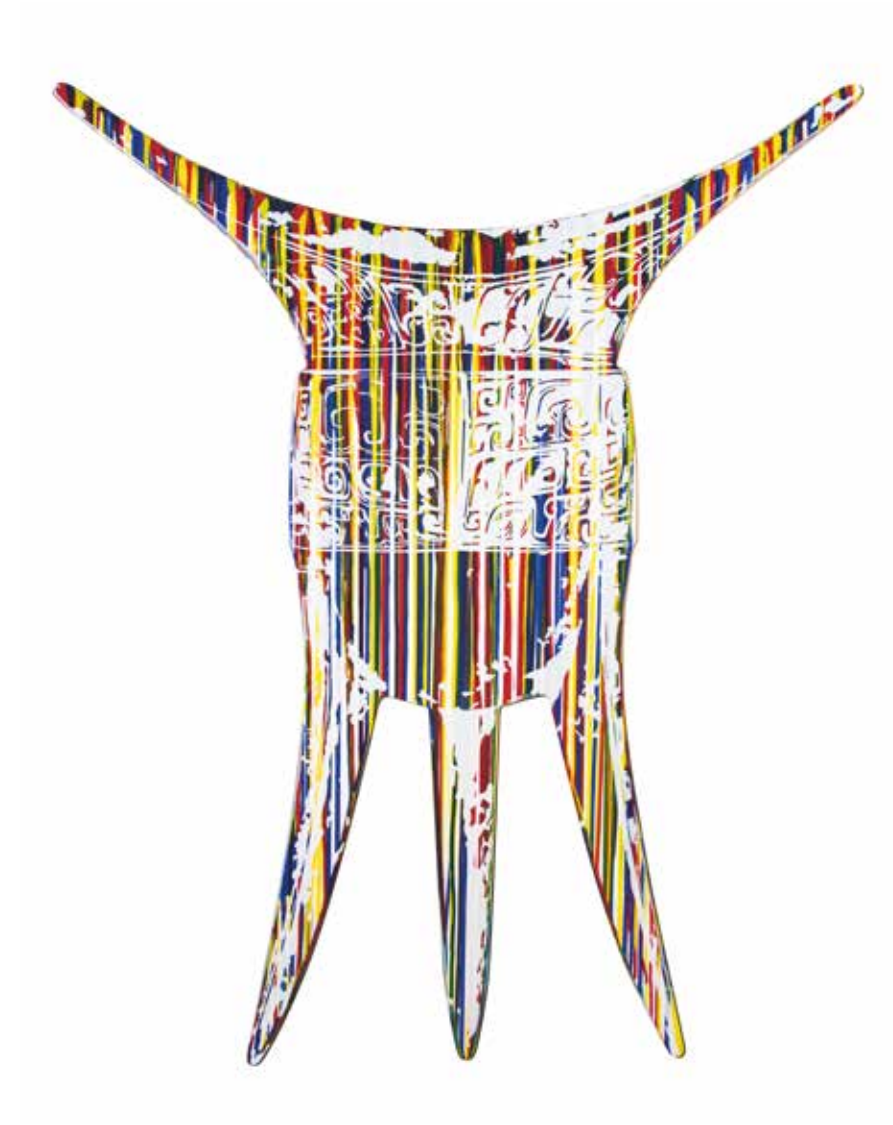
Blue and White Porcelain, Girl with Flute (Florescent Orange) (2019)
Automotive Paint on Steel; 160cm x 80cm



Blue and White Porcelain, Girl with Flute (Samples)



Jue, Shang Dynasty, 8900 on Black base, Black shadow (2020)
Automotive paint on steel; 100cm x 86cm



Jue, Shang Dynasty, Red Blue Yellow drip on White Base, Blue Pearls on White Shadow (2020)
Automotive paint on steel; 100cm x 86cm



Jue, Shang Dynasty, 8900 on White Base, Nardo Grey shadow (2020)
Automotive paint on steel; 100cm x 86cm



Tiffany Blue Door (Heroine of the Yangs, Mu Guiying) (2019)
Automotive paint on Wooden Door with Steel Frame; 210.4cm x 90.5cm x 11cm





Orange Door (Kuixing)(2020) | Automotive paint on Wooden Door with Steel Frame; 221cm x 94.5cm





SEAN LEAN (B. 1981)

Having obtained his Diploma in Visual & Digital Arts from Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology in 2000, Sean Lean’s work often deals with the issues of fragmented identities and the contradictions between traditional Eastern values and the lure of Western popular culture.

Through his works, Lean branches out with his own history and personal memory and reflects on the events that have shaped his country and his region. He traces social, political, and religious tensions, disparities, and engages with stories that have shaped the collective memory of his region. Despite the seriousness of the issue, elements of humor often find their way into his practice.

His solo exhibition ‘3’ (2019) presented various triptychs, each one highlighting the relationship between art and society. ‘3’ is a body of work that delves into his own history, but at the same time transcends his own individuality in its line of questioning tradition, religion, way of living, dogmas, and long-held beliefs. Interrogating identity, navigating history, and questioning ways of being is a thread that runs throughout Lean’s practice.

His previous exhibitions have followed a similar path. Through ‘Motherland’ (2015) the artist examined the core of what it means to be Chinese, questioning the shifting definitions/criterion of what it takes to be a Chinese person, and the generational loss and gains of a culture inherited and gradually diluted. In his process, he leans towards methods that were more “industrial”, and akin to techniques used in automotive painting. The artist feels that the exploration of methods that are more “mechanized” is more relevant and reflective of the time we live in.

‘M2’, Lean’s most recent show is a continuation of ‘Motherland’ and explores many similar concepts and ideas as ‘Motherland’. Lean treats his subject matter here with an undeniable sense of play and light heartedness this time, refusing to be bogged down by seriousness and guilt when discussing his cultural past. His approach this time is much more experimental and metaphorical, playing with

colour and materiality with his use of steel and unexpected palettes, all while tying his subject matter back to his disparate cultural upbringing.

His earlier series ‘Flesh: Blacks and Whites’ (2013) followed the artist’s subconscious state as he underwent a period of introspection. The inspiration behind the works stems from his inherent obsession with flesh. Initially a compulsion, it consequently progressed into an investigation of his personal idiosyncrasies. Each painting, presenting an albinistic or melanistic animal, serves as an introspective measure, whereby each animal depicted represents a particular facet of Lean’s ‘selves’.

In 2018, he was one of 6 artists from around the world commissioned by KENZO, in collaboration with Tiger Beer and WWF to work on a project called *Rare Stripes* – a collection of garments inspired by actual stories of wild tiger. Sean Lean’s design of Kamrita is very apt, as it showcases three sets of paw prints in different colours, signifying the Himalayan tigress with her two cubs walking through the forest floor. For years, Kamrita was WWF’s adopted tiger and a symbol of hope for her whole species. The collection was unveiled at the Ginza Six KENZO store in Tokyo, and was available in limited collection. He was also commissioned by Harper’s Bazaar to create a cover specially for Bazaar Art magazine in 2017.

EDUCATION

2000 Diploma in Visual & Digital Arts, Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2020 M2, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2018 3, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2015 Motherland, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2013 Flesh: Blacks & Whites, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2018 Patriots: By Malaysians for Malaysians, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 Teh Tarik with The Flag, curated by Wei-Ling Gallery, in association with The National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2017 Through Rose-Tinted Glasses, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 18@8 RIGHT HERE! RIGHT NOW!, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2016 Art Stage Jakarta 2016, Sheraton Grand Jakarta Gandaria City Hotel, Jakarta, Indonesia
2015 The Space Between, curated by Anurendra Jegadeva & Rahel Joseph, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2014 Bologna Fiere SH Contemporary 2014, Shanghai Exhibition Centre, China
2013 18@8 Mirror, Mirror on the wall, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 Measuring Love, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2012 Bright Young Things, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2002 Urbanscapes, organized by Klue Magazine, Grappa, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 VDA Graduation Show, Loke Mansion ADKL, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2001 Manusia, NN Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
 Doors, Loke Mansion ADKL, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2000 Eyes Wide Open, LUCT, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

AWARDS

2002 Presidential Scholar Award, Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology
 Young Achievers Award, Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology
2001 Best Student Award in Visual & Digital Arts, Limkokwing University of Creative Technology
1999 NST Scholarship Award, Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology
 Doors, Loke Mansion ADKL, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2000 Eyes Wide Open, LUCT, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



ABOUT UOB AND ART

At United Overseas Bank (UOB), we believe that art transcends language, culture, geographies and time. Its history gives people a sense of identity and perspective, it informs with the present and it creates a future for the imagination. It builds relationships and unites people. As such and given our longstanding presence in the region, we have been behind Southeast Asian art for more than four decades.

UOB champions Southeast Asian art through its flagship UOB Painting of the Year (POY) Competition which began in Singapore in 1982. It is one of the most recognised art competitions in Southeast Asia. Through the UOB POY, we aim to uncover and to nurture the next generation of great Southeast Asian artists in the region. The competition is held at the national level in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

The annual UOB POY competition first ran in Malaysia in 2011. Over the years, the competition has seen well-known Malaysian artists compete at both the local and regional levels. Past years' competition winners include Ms Cheong Kiet Cheng, Mr Chok Yue Zan, Ms Yim Yen Sum, Mr Gan Tee Sheng and Ms Minstrel Kuik.

For more information on the UOB Painting of the Year Competition, visit www.UOBPOY.com.

For further information on UOB Malaysia, visit www.UOB.com.my.

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I would like to thank Wei-Ling for the continuous trust in giving me this opportunity and the team at Wei-Ling Gallery for their tremendous support in making this show a reality. Thank-you to UOB for supporting my show and for encouraging the growth of the art scene in Malaysia.

Thank you John and Ryan Lean, brothers/ mentors/ role models/ studio assistants/ nanciers/ all-round providers, for doing what they do, so I can make art.

And my parents, for showing me how to be human, Chinese or otherwise.
Thank you.

-SL



Wei-Ling Gallery

To accompany the exhibition entitled 'M2' by Sean Lean from 15 January - 29 February 2020

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EDITED BY | Amanda Ariawan & Aileen Tan

Cover Image | **Crane Sunrise (Samples)** (2019) (Close up)

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